Baggage - Part 1

# The Weight

## (Matthew 11.28; Acts 9.3-9, 19-25; Luke 15.11-32)

As we begin week number one of this series called “Baggage” I want to challenge you to prayerfully acknowledge that you’ve got some baggage, because if you’re anything like me you don’t want to talk about it. None of us do, we’d prefer to keep our baggage, our dirty laundry out of sight. We don’t want to see it, we don’t want to talk about it, but what happens is that over time the weight becomes burdensome, and we stumble under its weight because it just gets too heavy. And so, my prayer today is that you would bring to God the baggage, the weight that you’ve been struggling with, and let him do what only he can do.

You see, the reality is that when we were younger, when we were growing up, we had a more idealistic way of thinking. You and I, we were full of hope and optimistic about the future, but then life happens, there were some bumps and bruises along the way. Maybe someone said to you, “You never do anything right, or you’ll never amount to anything, or I wish I never had you, or maybe, “I don’t love you anymore.” And suddenly, in a split second you’ve got baggage, it’s not a lot, it’s just a carry-on, you think you can manage it, and so you learn to live with it.

However, before long you’ve got even more baggage, because your best friend betrays you. Or maybe that person that you thought was a Christian isn’t treating you like a Christian. And even though you’ve tried your very best, the one you love tells you “It’s just not good enough.” And before long all these negative words, thoughts, and emotions are playing in a loop through your mind and year after year without even realizing it the weight becomes unbearable. Suddenly, you find yourself stumbling because life has become very heavy, and it becomes exceedingly difficult to live life according to God’s principles.

And so, what we want to do is learn to get in the habit of giving our baggage to God. Like that person who helps carry baggage at an airport, a train station, or hotel; we need to say, “Jesus, take it all.” And this is so very fitting because that’s exactly what Jesus invites us to do. In Matthew chapter 11 he said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). And so, what we want to do in the remainder of our time today is to let the Word of God reframe our way of thinking, silencing the lies of the past, so that we can embrace the truth of God in this present moment.

Over the past few weeks, we’ve been studying in the book of Acts and we’ve seen the work of the Holy Spirit in these first believers. It was these disciples of Jesus that would become the foundation of the church and they would do the kinds of stuff that would make them look like gods and not like men. As they ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit, people would touch their clothing or just coming near and their shadow would fall on them and they would be healed. And so, the disciples were preaching the gospel, casting out demons, shaking prisons, starting churches and doing all kinds of amazing things.

One of the things that I love about the Bible is that God is careful to give us glimpses of the disciple’s humanity so that we’re able to make the distinction between the anointing and the man. This is important because we need to be careful not to have unrealistic expectations of men and women of God, but always to make sure that the object of our faith is God. It’s for that reason that the apostle Paul reminds the church in second Corinthians, “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

And so, the Holy Spirit allows us to see the wounds and the scars, to hear the stories of shipwrecks, imprisonments, and danger. These were believers who have known hunger and thirst, who’ve been cold and naked, who’ve been constantly on the move for the sake of the gospel, giving us a sense of balance as we get a glimpse into their lives. In the Bible we’re able to see the contrast between the magnificence of the anointing and the weakness or the humanity of the vessel. And so, it’s in the book of Acts that we see the complexity of what it means to be handpicked by Jesus, called to take up their cross and follow him, but to be human just like you and I.

I want to share with you in Acts chapter 9, what is probably the most radical conversion of any of the apostles. The apostle Paul who is considered by many as the most important person after Christ in biblical history, but before his conversion he was known as Saul, and he persecuted the church killing Christians. And yet, it wasn’t that he was such a bad person, it was because he was a religious person, he was an Orthodox Jew, he was a Pharisee of the tribe of Benjamin. And so, following the Old Testament law he saw Christianity as a threat to Judaism and thought he was doing a service to God by crushing those who followed Jesus.

Saul was a member of the Sanhedrin, leaders of the Jewish people, and he had great influence. He was dangerous and posed a great threat to the early church until God stopped him on the road to Damascus. The Bible tells us in Acts chapter nine, verse three, that as he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:3-4).

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do” (Acts 9:5-6).

The Bible tells us that the men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing. So, they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything (Acts 9:7-9).

Meanwhile, God had called a disciple named Ananias in a vision to come and place his hands on Saul and restore his sight. Ananias was fearful but went to the house where Saul was staying, placing his hands on him, he prayed that he would see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Immediately, his eyesight was restored, he got up and was baptized. The Bible says that he spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

“At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 9:19-22).

God did many amazing things through Paul, he became one of the most powerful apostles. In fact, he contributed more to our understanding of God than any of the other apostles. The Bible tells us that people were saved, healed, and delivered because of his ministry; entire cities were transformed because of his preaching. But at first, after his conversion, Paul was an outsider, and he daily faced the shame of persecuting the church.

In fact, the Bible says, “When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple” (Acts 9:26). However, none of what they thought, none of what they believed, none of what they said, none of his baggage stopped his destiny from coming to pass, because that was all in the past, that was his old life before Christ. But even now it seemed that wherever he went he was rejected, people were afraid of him, and even among his own brethren he was considered an apostate and a traitor. In fact, the Bible says,

“After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall” (Acts 9:23-25).

There were those who came to know and love him, and so Paul carrying the baggage of his own shame, feeling unworthy, even unloved at times, himself became baggage as his friends lowered him in a basket outside of the city wall.

Today, I hope you understand that none of the past, none of the disgrace, none of the flaws, none of the failures stop you from being a candidate to be used mightily of God. We’ve been talking about baggage today and my hope is that this message goes deep, even to the point of making you uncomfortable, because there are some of you who have put your trust in Jesus Christ, you’ve been forgiven of your sins, but you have yet to forgive yourself. You may feel like nobody really understands, nobody knows what you’re going through, and somewhere in the back of your mind, scrolling through your thoughts are voices saying, “You’re unworthy, you’re not good enough, you don’t deserve God’s forgiveness.” And yet today, I hope you’ll understand that in Christ you are forgiven, and so it’s time to forgive yourself, it’s time to stop carrying around that baggage and move on. Not because you’re so good, not because you’re so smart, not because you’ve earned it, not because you deserve it, but because of the riches of God’s grace in Christ.

The Bible says it this way in Ephesians chapter 1, in Christ “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace” (Ephesians 1:7). And so, whenever you begin to hear those negative thoughts, when you begin to feel the shame, the unworthiness, or the insecurity, you remember what God has done; because today if you’re a believer and you have put your trust in Jesus Christ, you are secure in him.

The Bible says, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the grave is living inside of you. In other words, you are secure because you have been sealed with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. In fact, the apostle Paul describes it this way, he who says, “It is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Corinthians 1:21-22).

I want to illustrate this for you with a story that Jesus told in Luke chapter 15, that is often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, because Jesus makes it very clear that God welcomes and forgives repentant sinners. And so, reading from verse 11, Jesus tells us, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them” (Luke 15:11-12).

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So, he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything” (Luke 15:13-16).

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So, he got up and went to his father” (Luke 15:17-20).

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20).

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Luke 15:21).

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So, they began to celebrate” (Luke 15:22-24).

In this parable the father welcomes his shameful son home, covering him with the best robe, putting a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet and prepares a feast to celebrate. In the same way, from the beginning of time God has gone to great lengths to restore humanity, to remove our shame, and to bring us back into fellowship with him. Today, God wants you to know that he sees you, that he’s running off the porch to get you, he knows you haven’t had a bath, he knows you’ve been with the pigs, but he still loves you and he wants you. In fact, he knows about all your baggage, that weight that you’ve been carrying around, he knows about your pain, the nightmares, and the tears. He knows all your secrets and yet he still wants you.

You see, God loves you because he made you, he formed you in the secret place, and he knows everything about you. He understands that people are complicated, in one moment they sing “Hosanna,” and the next moment they’re shouting, “crucify him.” He knows that our duplicity can be painful and that somewhere deep inside there is that baggage. We all respond to the weight in different ways, some of us try to dress it up, cover it up and bury it, but you can’t take a pill and make the pain go away, only God the Father can take it away.

In this parable, the father welcomed his repentant son and immediately covered his son’s shame and celebrated with him. Meanwhile the Bible says, "The older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So, he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound. The older brother became angry and refused to go in…” (Luke 15:25-28).

Like the older brother, we live in a culture today, where everybody expects you to be what they can’t be. And so, no matter what you do, what role you play, what position you take, there is always somebody who wants to dig through your baggage, looking for dirty laundry, just so that they can put you down and say you’re not this or you’re not that. And it doesn’t matter how smart or talented you are, they want nothing more than to see you shamed and humiliated in public.

I love how God’s word is so transparent, revealing to us this shameful moment in the life of this young man, the division within the family caused by the conflict with his older brother in which we see the complexities of our own humanity. And so, we must recognize that people can be vicious, eager to share somebody else’s dirty laundry, and they will attack you, mock you, and laugh at you even though they are guilty themselves. And none of us are above this, you can be really good at something, you can be exceptional at doing that, and yet still have great shame about something else.

In fact, I have no doubt that each one of you has something in your life that you would not want printed on the front page of the paper or shared on Facebook. But what’s really important is that we silence the voices, remembering that you are not who others say that you are, but you are who Christ says you are. And so, you just close your ears to those harsh, judgmental, and painful words. You close the door to words that are not true, unpack the baggage, because in Christ you’re forgiven, you’re secure, and you are free.

Some of you walked in here with some baggage today and it’s time to unpack it, go through it and lay it down. It’s time to take it to God, because as we close, we’re going to celebrate the Lord’s Supper together. And so, for some of you your prayer is, “God, help me to let it go, or help me to forgive, or maybe restore that which has been lost?” And our Father has been waiting, looking out the window, standing on the porch, waiting for his son or his daughter to come back. His arms are outstretched right now, some of you have been Christians for years, but you’re still carrying deep shame, you’re still carrying a lot of baggage. And God loves you, he’s waiting, and he’s watching. And so, today, whatever bags you are carrying, would you prayerfully, in a spiritual sense, would you lay them down at the foot of the cross? Let’s come to God in prayer.

Pastor John Talcott

Christ’s Community Church

303 West Lincoln Avenue

Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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(301) 447-4224

[www.cccaog.org](http://www.cccaog.org)

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